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THE WAR OF ABSOLUTES

by J. M. Lalley

The conflict between international Catholicism and international Communism now seems likely to dominate the second half of the Twentieth Century, and may well before it has ended involve the whole of human Society, since it can hardly end otherwise than in the extinction of one force by the other. Each side has recognized this mortal struggle as inescapable; each claims an oecumenical mission and authority, and each is promised under the terms of its own revelation the ultimate historical triumph. Communism is more than a political and economic doctrine; it is a religion that derives from the worship of an extra-human power to which the will, intellect and desires of the votary must be subordinate. It has its own scriptures, theology and eschatology. It has its Pope, its Curia, its Congregation of Propaganda, its far-flung and ever-active missions in partibus infidelium. Russian Communism, indeed, may be conceived as both the formal counterpart and the substantial antithesis of its Roman adversary.

The god of the Communists is the material principle of the universe. The operation of this principle in the evolution of history becomes for the believer a kind of Providence in whose name are justified whatever horrors and cruelties must be employed to hasten the advent of the promised kingdom. In the Marxist view, religions that are spiritual in content and other-worldly in impulse are impediments to the evolution of this world toward the classless society, and must therefore be eradicated. In the Catholic view Communism is the synthesis into which all the characteristically modern, anthropocentric and secularist heresies have at last been absorbed.

Thus in the ideological sphere there has never been and could not be any truce or compromise. In the political sphere, however, for tactical reasons, each side, had it been possible, might have preferred to delay the decisive struggle -- the Kremlin until it had fully consolidated its control of the satellite countries, the Vatican in the hope of salvaging what it could from the great catastrophe that has overtaken the Church in Eastern Europe. At the end of the war the policy of the Vatican in the countries that had come into the Soviet orbit was to seek agreements with the new popular-front governments upon almost any terms that would permit the church to retain its independent

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organization and control of its schools. But after the inevitable seizures of power by the Communists and the suppression of political opposition, the Church, by reason of its claims to independence and its associations with the non-Communist world, became the symbol and focus of all popular resistance. The prelates in their conflicts with the State had the open or secret approval of all who feared or hated the new régimes. In Hungary, for example, as one observer has reported, "to be anti-Communist was to be pro-Mindzenty", so that the supporters of the primate included innumerable Calvinists, Lutherans and men of no particular belief. The Communists, then, had no choice but to proceed piecemeal with the liquidation of the Roman Catholic hierarchy.

The tactics of persecution have been in all countries much the same; they seem to have been adapted from those pursued nearly thirty years ago against the Patriarch Tikhon and his followers, when the campaign of wholesale confiscations and arrests was accompanied by official patronage of a schismatic body called the Living Church. This patronage was withdrawn when the schism had served its purpose and the power of the Russian Orthodox Church had been broken. The attack upon the organization of the Roman Catholic Church in Eastern Europe began with the Uniate Church of the Ukraine. Its patriarch and bishops were removed by murder or imprisonment and replaced by clerical fellow travellers who proclaimed a secession from the Roman Communion and a transfer of allegiance to the new puppet patriarchate of Moscow. Similarly, in Hungary and Czechoslovakia the immediate purpose of the Cominform is to force a schism with Rome and the creation of national churches that will serve for a time as instruments of State propaganda. The formula will almost certainly be repeated in Poland as soon as the regime considers itself prepared to cope with the more formidable resistance to be anticipated there.

In all these conflicts the material advantage lies, congruously enough, with the Communists. Materially and geographically the Vatican has been a loser by the recent war, and by the diplomacy of Cairo, Teheran, Yalta and Potsdam, almost to the extent that the Kremlin has been the gainer. Of the Eastern and Central European populations now under Soviet domination those in Poland, Lithuania, Hungary and Czechoslovakia are predominantly Catholic, and there are strong minorities of both Latin and Uniate Catholics in Romania. In Yugoslavia, where the Dalmatians, Croats and the majority of Slovenes are traditionally Catholic, the persecution was for a time intense, and the position of the Church seems but slightly improved by Marshal Tito's breach with Moscow.

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Thus there now remains of Catholic Europe only Western Austria, portions of Western Germany, Luxembourg, part of the Netherlands, Belgium, France, Italy, Spain, Portugal and Ireland. Some of these may properly be described as Catholic countries in the cultural rather than the religious sense. In many parts of Western Europe the Communists have won large followings among the Catholic masses. Outside Europe the prospect has also darkened. In the Catholic provinces of Canada the Communist influence appears to be negligible, but it is said to be growing steadily in Latin America and in the Philippines. The extensive Catholic missions of China are now in Communist hands.

Communism, in a word, has presented to the church a threat more formidable than the rise of Islam, for this time the enemy is both external and internal. The danger, certainly, is no greater to Catholicism than to other Christian religions, but the divisions and antagonisms among modern Christians seem likely to prove even more advantageous to the Communists than the jealousies of Rome and Constantinople were to the Moslems. At any rate, the Catholic Church, by the nature of its organization and discipline, seems better prepared than either Orthodoxy or Protestantism for a world-wide counterattack.

Nor is it surprising that for this attack Rome should have resorted to its ultimate and most terrible weapon, and have passed the sentence of major excommunication upon all duly baptized Christians who are members of the Communist Party or are collaborators with it, and threatened with like punishment all who read Communist writings. By the decree of the Holy Office the cases of Communists and fellow travellers are reserved to the Pope, which means that such persons can be readmitted to the Church only by him, or by some eminent cleric to whom he has delegated his power of absolution. The purpose here is evidently to assure some form of public abjuration, although canon law appears to exempt from this provision those who are in immediate danger of death.

II

A word perhaps may be needed here concerning the nature and history of excommunication. Almost all religious societies of course have excluded certain categories of offenders from participation in their rites. Indeed the Communist Party itself employs the weapon of excommunication, both individually, as when a member is called upon to surrender his card, and collectively, as in the periodic purges.

The commonest form of excommunication is the liturgical one, in which the offender is merely excluded from the temple or from some par-

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ticular act of worship until he has undergone a prescribed ceremonial purification. In the legend of the Argonauts, for example, we find Jason and Medea, who are under excommunication for the murder of Absyrtus, seeking purification at the hands of Circe. A more drastic form of excommunication is that in which the faithful are forbidden all social contact with the offender. In the famous Sophoclean tragedy Oedipus pronounces this form of excommunication upon all who may shield the slayer of his father Laius, and thus unwittingly upon himself.

Such forms existed also among the Old Testament Jews. In the Book of Ezra we read how, upon the return from the Babylonish captivity, the Jews who had taken wives among the gentiles were called upon to abandon them under penalty of excommunication and expulsion from the commonwealth. What such punishments mean to persons living in tribal or village societies can be readily imagined. Under modern conditions excommunication has lost some of its external terrors, although canon law still requires the faithful to shun the class of excommunicates called vitandi, among whom Communists are now apparently included. But, generally speaking, the efficacy of the punishment must depend upon conscience and belief.

The present canonical regulations concerning excommunication are derived from the papal constitution Apostolicae Sedis, promulgated by Pius IX in 1869. Canonically, Communists appear to fall into the category of an "anti-social sect", which is defined as one aiming at the subversion of authority in Church or State or in both. Among other groups that have been condemned on this ground under pain of excommunication are the Freemasonic lodges (by Clement XII in 1739), the Carbonari (by Pius VII in 1821), and the Fenian Brotherhood (by the Congregation of the Holy Office in 1870). The first two are mentioned by name (sectae Masonicae aut Carbonariae) in the papal constitution. The Fenians were condemned at the instigation of the Irish bishops who, having come to an understanding with the British Government on the educational question, had also become supporters of the British ascendency.

Yet by 1869 the Carbonari had ceased to be a factor in Italian or European politics, and probably have not even a vestigal existence today. The present government of Eire, which may be considered the joint creation of the Fenians and the more pacific revolutionary movement known as Sinn Fein, is on excellent terms with the Holy See. In these two instances, then, the condemnation and censure have been vitiated by events. The condemnation of the Freemasons, however, remains; it applies not only to the anti-clerical, and perhaps in some cases Communis-

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tic lodges, allied to the Grand Orient, but also to the unrevolutionary and apolitical Scottish and York Rite lodges, which appear to be regarded by Rome as deistic or unitarian cults. This has not prevented practical understandings between the Latin American hierarchies and governments dominated by radical Freemasons; nor has it prevented amicable relationships between North American Catholics and their Masonic neighbors.

III

Such an accommodation, however, seems scarcely possible in future between Catholics and Communists, since each side is aware that it is engaged in a battle to the death. Yet recent interpretations of the censure make it seem less drastic than at first appeared. It is not, for example, held to prohibit the marriage of Catholics and baptized Communists. The immediate purposes of the edict seem to be two. The first is to hold the wavering in line in the countries where persecutions are in progress. The second is to break, if possible, the power of Communist parties in Western Europe. This of course involves a test of the political power of the Church; and its leaders, we may suppose, are aware that they have staked its prestige in the contest.

In the satellite countries the Communist response has been to invoke the immense apparatus of physical intimidation against those who attempt to publish or to enforce the censure. In the long run the issue will be decided by what the lesser clergy and the faithful are able or willing to endure. The bishops, being few and conspicuous, can be easily isolated and destroyed. In many of these countries there appear to be well-organized movements of underground resistance, in which Catholics no doubt are playing a considerable part. Yet such organizations are necessarily secret, revolutionary and subversive of the authority of the State, and thus by an historical irony seem to fall into the category of "anti-social societies", as defined in the constitution Apostolicae Sedis. To this the Catholic apologist might retort that a tyrannical State destructive of religion and natural law is never a legitimate authority; but no one familiar with episcopal writings of the Nineteenth Century on the subject of political authority can fail to be impressed by the change of emphasis.

The Communist response in bourgeois countries will be to multiply and exacerbate jealousies, suspicions and hostilities between Catholics and other non-Communist groups, and where possible to create them among Catholics themselves. Contrary to an opinion cherished by many American liberals, there is among Catholics, whether clerics or laity, no such

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monolithic unity of mind and action as is required of members of the Communist Party, at any rate on political and social questions. Some Catholics appear inseparably wedded to bourgeois social ideals, others despise them. Many European Catholics have embraced quasi-Fascistic principles, such as were represented by the Spanish Falange or by L'Action Francaise; but the political programs of most European Catholic politicians are indistinguishable from those of the Democratic Socialists. Some Catholics, of whom the late Eric Gill affords an example, consider industrial civilization to be evil in all its aspects; others are striving for a Christian industrialism through "shop apostolates" and capture of the trade union movement. There is a kind of Catholic radicalism, represented in France by the Jeunesse Ouvriére Chretienne and in the United States by the Catholic Worker movement, that attempts to be more proletarian than the Marxists. There are Catholic royalists still dreaming of a restored alliance of throne and altar and there are truculent ultramontanists of the model of Louis Veuillot. There are democratic liberals in the tradition of Lamennais and Lacordaire, and decentralist liberals of the school of Acton and Tocqueville. All, however, are fond of justifying their positions by an appeal to scholastic writings or the social encyclicals of Leo XIII and Pius XI. All may be expected to oppose the Communists; but it may take more than an edict of the Apostolic Chair to bring them into an agreement concerning the most effective form of opposition.

Perhaps it is here in the United States, where tensions among minorities have been increased close to the point of rupture, that the Communist strategy of division and rule offers greatest promise of success. Here the Church leadership is at a psychological disadvantage, not offset by the numerical strength of its following. In this country Catholicism is not, as it must be to even the most bitterly anti-clerical Europeans, an ineradicable part of the historical landscape. In many American Catholics, especially those of the second immigrant generation, the conflict of religion and culture produces a kind of ambivalence that sets them apart from their forbears without quite reconciling them to their neighbors. It often results in an aesthetic homelessness that finds compensation in philistine vulgarity. This sense of separation is further emphasized by a Platonic educational tradition that isolates the Catholic undergraduate from all currents of contemporary thought. In a word the modern American Catholic is likely to understand his neighbors little better than they understand him.

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This doubtless explains why Catholics in spite of their numbers exercise so little influence upon the character of American life. Their efforts to do so have usually taken the form of direct censorial pressures, not always gently, or tactfully or intelligently applied. In many cases they have bred resentments, which at the first evidence of weakness may break out into open hostility. In the theatre and movies, the Leftist influences have been far more subtle and successful than those of the Breen office and the Legion of Decency. It is the same story in journalism and literature; it is doubtful whether any Catholic could be perverted by reading the Daily Worker or the pedantic Marxist journals, as he is now forbidden to do; it is altogether probable that he will continue to read Communist propaganda without being aware of it.

Meanwhile, there are evidences that the traditional American principle of religious toleration is crumbling under the stress of events. It may be, as Dr. Reinhold Niebuhr has suggested, that to carry the principle of toleration to a logical extreme is actually to establish secularism as a state religion; certainly fear that the grandiose programs of government subsidies for schools and student welfare may lead to the complete secularization of American life has prompted the hierarchy to its present attitude of opposition. For if, as is now proposed, the citizen is to be kept at school throughout a third of his life, the burden of supporting two such educational systems must sooner or later become too great for Catholics to carry. But what was doubtless intended as a defense of the Catholic schools against the ever-widening encroachments of the State was permitted, through an inept tactical management, to seem an effort to gain control of public funds for religious purposes.

IV

It is too early to surmise what effect the mortal struggle with Communism will have on the general attitude of Roman Catholics toward other Christian churches. Although in the United States animosities between Catholics and Protestants are increasing rather than diminishing, abroad there had been until recently many signs of rapprochement. This was especially true of Catholics and Confessional Protestants in Germany during the Hitlerian persecutions. There was, however, much disappointment and some indignation among Protestants over the absence of Catholic representatives at the oecumenical conference of Christian churches at Amsterdam, and especially at the attitude of the Dutch hierarchy. The disappointment was all the greater because of earlier rumors of sympathetic interest at the Vatican in the preparations for the conference.

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One can merely conjecture what clandestine diplomatic moves and countermoves may have preceded the conference. The known fact is that Dr. Karl Barth, the famous Swiss theologian, sarcastically rebuked those who had placed hopes on an understanding with Rome; for Rome, he told the conference, will always refuse reconciliation on any terms but its own.

Certainly, the historical tendency of the Catholic Church in epochs of crisis has been toward greater intransigeance. It was the spirit of Ximenez rather than Erasmus that guided the Tridentine Fathers, who, according to Lord Acton, "impressed on the church the stamp of an intolerant age". This rigid temper was somewhat relaxed in the Eighteenth Century, especially in the pontificate of Benedict XIV, but it was resumed under the stresses of the French Revolution. Throughout the greater part of the Nineteenth Century the papacy resolutely set its face against everything Protestant or modern. The triumphant liberalism was challenged by the Syllabus of Errors, the triumphant nationalism by the dogma of papal infallibility. In the end, to be sure, the alliance of clericalism and reaction was dissolved by Leo XIII in his policy of ralliément, and the industrial revolution was formally recognized in the famous encyclical De Rerum Novarum. Some see in the present decadence of bourgeois Society, and in the evolution of democracy into the Socialist Welfare State, vindication of the wisdom of the Vatican's long hostility to liberalism of all shades. Others see rather the fulfillment of Tocqueville's prophecy, that by refusing to accept the French Revolution as an accomplished fact, the clergy would lose the opportunity to direct the democratic Society toward spiritualized ends, thus permitting it by default to drift into a sodden materialism.

The question now is whether in its death struggle with Communism the church will act alone, and in the apocalyptic conviction that, sooner or later, all men must choose between Rome and Moscow, or whether it will invite alliances with other Christian bodies. A clue to policy will perhaps be found in the action of the Vatican concerning the numerous petitions that the doctrine of the Assumption be proclaimed de fide. The belief that the body of the Blessed Virgin Mary was carried at her death directly into Heaven is almost universally held among devout Catholics, but as generally rejected by Protestants. To include it, as is now proposed, among the articles of faith would be a sign that all immediate hope of a reunion of Christians has been abandoned.

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